Redevelopment plans for St. Paul’s former Ford site unveiled

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When the Ryan Cos. redevelop the former Ford manufacturing land in St. Paul’s Highland Park into 3,800 units of housing, they won’t be adding a golf course. There will be no corporate campus, 10-story buildings or major surface parking lots. And a Ford Museum isn’t part of their concept plans, either.

Instead, the Minneapolis-based Ryan Cos. plan to install architecture reminiscent of Highland Village, a central water corridor that will be surrounded by four pedestrian-only and bicycle-only blocks on either side, 35 single-family homes along Mississippi River Boulevard and six-story and seven-story buildings closer to Ford Parkway.

Over the next decade, residents can also expect senior and affordable housing, a street grid that puts bicycles, pedestrians and drivers on a level playing field, more than 50 acres of public open space and 1,000 trees.
“Folks all around the country will look at this area as one of the best examples of mixed-income development,” said Mike Ryan, a principal with the Ryan Cos., pointing to renderings of a future civic plaza and water-lined promenade. “This is really going to become the gem of the area.”

As for the three ballparks used by St. Paul Highland Ball, two will remain exactly where they are, a major concession to the long-standing neighborhood baseball organization. An extension of Montreal Avenue will eliminate the third ball field.

Ryan and Tony Barranco, another principal with Ryan Cos., unveiled long-awaited renderings and concept plans Wednesday night to a sizable audience at Highland Park Middle School.

The Ryan team, which plans to purchase the property from the real estate division of the Ford Motor Co., promised a diverse mix of housing laid out to minimize the need for car travel and maximize pedestrian access. In short — a showpiece neighborhood.

Ryan acknowledged, however, that any number of details have yet to be sorted out, from the placement and number of dog parks and playgrounds to sustainable infrastructure that will include a “best-in-class” stormwater system.

The Ryan Cos., founded in Minnesota in the 1930s, have completed projects in 38 states, including the CHS Field ballpark in downtown St. Paul and the Downtown East project in Minneapolis. Ford Land, the real estate division of Ford, selected Ryan as master developer for the 122-acre site in June.

Since then, the Ryan Cos. have held a series of interactive listening sessions to garner feedback on community concerns and priorities. Ryan and Barranco joked that when it came to retail, demand for a new bakery and brewery came through loud and clear.

The developers said they plan to install 3,800 housing units over the next decade or so, about 95 percent of the 4,000 units envisioned within the master plan that was approved by the St. Paul City Council a year ago, as well as 150,000 square feet of retail.

The general concept calls for a gradual upward slope heading east from the river bluff,
Ford, which began assembling cars in Minneapolis in 1912 and producing Model T’s at the Highland Park site in 1925, closed the plant in December 2011 after nearly a century in operation.

The land, which overlooks the Mississippi River in St. Paul’s relatively affluent Highland Park neighborhood, is being cleaned to residential standards under the supervision of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency.

The city began convening community groups to discuss the future of the Ford site a decade ago, with a master plan and rezoning plan gathering steam over the past three years.

“There's a lot to like,” said St. Paul City Council member Chris Tolbert. “Obviously, I like the amount of green space and park space, and keeping the ball fields. They really worked within the framework that the neighborhood and the city put together and passed as our vision last year. Obviously, there were some changes.”

In an email message to supporters, the board of directors of St. Paul Highland Ball said preserving the east and west ballfields is “great news” and they appreciated “Ryan’s generosity in recognizing the value this neighborhood gem has provided the community for the past 65 years.”

The project has already survived a petition effort brought by Highland Park residents opposed to the medium-to-heavy density of the master plan and a difficult city council vote last fall over rezoning. Some critics remain livid.

Bryan Steelman, a resident of Highland Park, predicted the land would soon be overrun by cars. He said the property should be converted into a health and wellness corporate campus with a five-star hotel and golf course — not into residential housing.

“This is fundraising off the backs of taxpayers,” Steelman said. “It doesn’t create an economic package. This is a land-locked piece of geography. That’s why Ford moved out of here.”

The Ryan development team said they were committed to working with affordable-housing partners to ensure that 20 percent of the units on site qualify as affordable
“Who did you see here?” said Metric Giles, director of the Community Stabilization Project, which advocates for tenants' rights. “Did you see any representation of that 20 percent? I would like for them to have the meetings in other destinations. They need to reach out to have those meetings in those areas where that population is. Actively engage those people.”

Ryan said a follow-up community meeting will take place in November. He envisioned Ford to close on a land sale within the next few months, and construction to begin within a year.

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Frederick Melo was once sued by a reader for $2 million but kept on writing. He came to the Pioneer Press in 2005 and brings a testy East Coast attitude to St. Paul beat reporting. He spent nearly six years covering crime in the Dakota County courts before switching focus to the St. Paul mayor's office, city council, and all things neighborhood-related, from the city's churches to its parks and light rail. A resident of Hamline-Midway, he is married to a Frogtown woman. He Tweets with manic intensity at @FrederickMelo.

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